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MIKE SHAYNE

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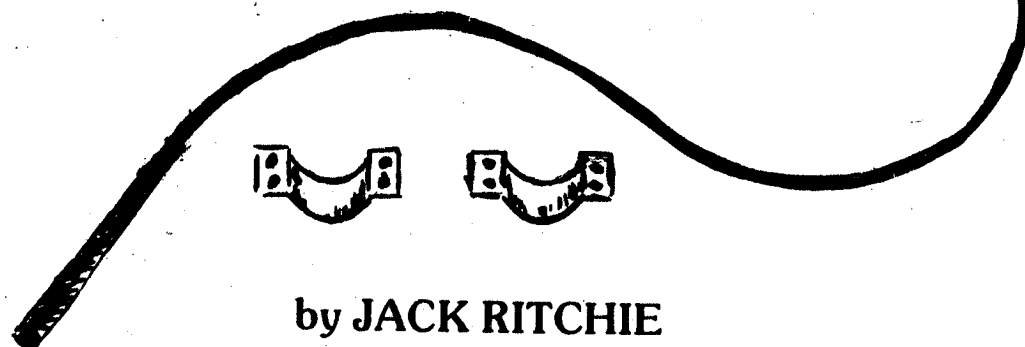
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The Little Room



by JACK RITCHIE

Jackson Was Willing to Go to any Extreme to Get Back His Wife — as Long as He Didn't Have to Pay Ransom.

AFTER THEY TIED the unconscious man to the rack, Clement turned to Jackson. "When was your wife kidnapped?"

"The day before yesterday." Jackson's eyes went to the damp stone walls with their array of tongs, clamps, and hooks. "Is this room soundproof?"

Clement smiled. "I haven't gotten around to that refinement for my little dungeon yet. However the nearest neighbor is more than a mile down the road. I doubt if a scream — *any* scream — would carry that far."

The man on the rack groaned, but his eyes remained closed. Jackson had given him the broken nose and the smashed mouth, but the simple beating hadn't made him talk.

Clement lowered himself into one of the fourteenth century iron chairs. "Have you informed the police about the kidnapping?"

"Yes."

Clement indicated the unconscious man. "But they don't know that you have this man, Fredericks?"

"No."

Clement studied his soft white hands. "Fredericks told you that he knew nothing at all about the kidnapping? He was merely there to pick up the package and take it back up to his room? He was to wait until someone came for it and he would be paid one hundred dollars for the errand?"

"That's what he said."

"Why don't you believe him?"

"I think he would have told me that within the first five minutes. But it took him a lot longer before he came up with the story."

"Maybe he was just being stubborn. Some people get that way when they're pushed. Where were the police all the time you were beating him up?"

"I didn't tell them that I got the second note telling me where to drop off the ransom money."

Clement sighed. "Wouldn't it have been wiser just to let Fredericks pick up the money and depart? Your wife might be safe at home by now."

Jackson glared. "There was no guarantee that they would release her. I thought my way was better."

Clement regarded him. "Was there really money in that package, or was it a dummy?"

"It was a dummy."

"Perhaps you don't *have* the money for the ransom? Is that the reason you are resorting to this?"

Jackson flushed. "I have the money. I just don't think that — unless as a last resort — I should risk..."

Clement chuckled. "You thought you had a better and cheaper answer, but it just didn't quite work. So when Fredericks wouldn't talk, you brought him here to this acquaintance of yours who has the peculiar hobby of reconstructing torture chambers in his cellar?" Clement gazed at the coals glowing in the waist-high brazier. "Just what do you expect me to do to Fredericks?"

"Anything you have to. I leave that to your imagination. I want to know where my wife is."

Clement rubbed his neck. "Perhaps *you* are ready to go to extremes — after all, your wife has been kidnapped — but consider

my position. If anyone ever learned what..."

"I would be the last person in the world to tell anyone what you did to make him talk."

Clement laughed shortly. "It isn't quite that simple. If I chose to experiment on Fredericks, he would most certainly rush to the police later. I would most certainly be sent to prison or perhaps a mental institution."

Clement was silent for a few moments. "Don't you realize that if — *if* — we actually did any work on Fredericks, we could not, of course, ever release him to tell the world about his experiences. In other words, for our own protection, we would be obliged to kill him and dispose of the body."

He shook his head. "It is one thing to read, to dream, to *think*, about these things, and quite another actually to *do* them."

Jackson regarded him coldly. "Why didn't you just tell me to go away when I brought Fredericks here?"

Clement held up a hand. "I may still be able to aid you to some extent. When Frederick regains consciousness, I will describe to him the infinite variations of which my instruments are capable and allow him to assume that he will soon be experiencing most of them. I rather think that he will be most eager to tell you anything he knows."

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ericks stared at them and tried to move. His eyes widened as he looked about the room. "You're crazy! Both of you! I told you everything I know. *Everything!*"

Clement continued talking, purring — five minutes, ten. Finally he sighed deeply and turned to Jackson. "Perhaps Fredericks is telling the truth. He might know nothing at all about the actual kidnapping."

Jackson shoved him aside and his hands went to the rack's ratchet handle.

Clement moved to stop him, but then he licked his lips. "I've often wondered what it must have been like to work on the wretches during the Inquisition — trying to make them recant — knowing that it didn't really make any difference if they did or didn't and being able to go on and on . . ."

He reached for one of the pointed iron rods on the wall and laid it lovingly on the burning coals of the brazier.

Fredericks had dropped into unconsciousness for the third time when they heard the burr of the telephone upstairs.

Clement was at the basin washing his hands. "Get that, will you? Tell whoever it is that I'm busy right now and I'll call back when I have the time."

Jackson found the phone upstairs and lifted the receiver.

He recognized the woman's voice. It was his wife.

"Charles? Is that you there? I

didn't know where in the world you might be, so I've been making calls to everybody we know. I'm home, darling. I'm home, safe and sound."

Jackson frowned dully. "Home? Safe?"

"Yes. The police freed me just about an hour ago. It seems that they located someone who'd been a little suspicious when he saw those two men push me into their car and jotted down the license number."

Jackson stared at himself in the wall mirror. He saw a sweat-coated, flushed face.

"There were just two kidnapers, dear. They said that they'd sent you a second note telling you where to drop off the ransom money. They were paying some derelict a hundred dollars to pick it up for them and hold it until they claimed it. But the police can't find the man or the money."

Jackson ran his tongue over his dry lips. "I didn't get any second note. I didn't drop off any money."

When Jackson put down the phone, he stared at his reflection again. Then he turned and went back down the stairs.

Clement finished wiping his hands on a towel. "Who was that on the phone?"

Jackson shook himself. "Nothing. Nobody. A wrong number."

His eyes gleamed as he picked up his favorite thin knife. "Let's get back to work."